

New Zealand's Natural History

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 26 November 2005



Mount Cook

Steve Wakeham



Wandering Albatross

Steve Wakeham



Blue Duck

Ron Marshall



Rock Wren

Ron Marshall



Salvins Albatross

Steve Wakeham



New Zealand Dotterel

Steve Wakeham

Report compiled by Paul Dukes



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Pat Wilson
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Day 1

Monday 7 November

Thanks to crossing the International Date Line en route from London to New Zealand we arrived at Auckland 0545 on November 7th, two days after leaving Heathrow by date but in reality about 23 hours flying time with a tedious break at Los Angeles where immigration formalities kept us occupied for the whole of the re-fuelling stop. Despite the length of the journey, the cabin staff on the Air New Zealand flights had been very attentive and the extra leg room afforded by the seat pitch made the journey a lot more comfortable than envisaged. Emerging into the exit hall of Auckland's modern airport Terminal we found Mark Hanger and his daughter Alice waiting to meet us with a brightness that belied the early hour. Mark is a wiry, bearded character with a ready grin and cheerful disposition which we soon discovered to be typical of the easy-going 'Kiwis'. Mark is the owner of our New Zealand ground agents, Nature Quest, and with a background in botany more usually leads botanical tours but it was soon apparent that the breadth of his knowledge about New Zealand was enormous encompassing everything from fauna and flora to Maori culture, history and anecdotes about every hamlet we passed through. A steady flow of information was imparted to us through Mark's p.a. system and during the next few weeks I doubt whether any group in the country could be better informed although it is perhaps just as well that we did not face an examination at the end of the tour as occasionally heads would nod through the soporific effects of sunshine and coach travel! Alice joined us for the first part of the tour to assist Mark with the lunch-time catering and her affable nature soon endeared her to the group members. Having completed the first year of her university course she was seeking employment during the holidays and Dad had obliged with this chance to find out just how much food a group of pommie naturalists could consume each day!

Thankful for being slightly ahead of the rush hour, we sped down the motorway connecting the airport with the city centre and in no time at all joined a throng of guests in the foyer of the President Plaza Hotel which occupies a very convenient position close to the heart of the city. Unfortunately several large groups were just leaving as we arrived and our rooms were not likely to be ready until midday but the group accepted the situation with admirable tolerance and after a reviving breakfast set off into the city to occupy a few hours with sightseeing. Just a short walk away was the 630' high Skytower which dominates the Auckland skyline, and looking at the bungy jumping apparatus at the top of the tower confirmed a significant aspect of the New

Zealand character; namely that they just cannot resist hurling themselves off high places, taking zodiacs down roaring torrents and in general seeking adrenalin rushes or large amounts of exercise at every available opportunity!

After finally accessing our rooms, we were joined by the Pockocks., who had travelled to Auckland ahead of the tour, and ventured out into the traffic for our first birding excursion to Muriwai on the Tasman coast north west of the city. Roadside Starlings, Song Thrushes, Blackbirds and House Sparrows combined with the familiar looking road signs to confuse our tired brains into thinking we were still in the UK but Common Mynas among the Starlings, Spur-winged Plovers (aka Masked Lapwing) in fields beside the motorway and Purple Swamphens stalking along the verges, quickly dispelled all such thoughts. This was to be theme of the next three weeks, daily reminders of Britain in both landscape and birdlife contrasting with exotic vegetation, strange native birds and Maori place names. The nineteenth century settlers arrived in a very different country, cloaked with mysterious forests, but they wasted no time in felling these ancient trees and creating the neatly ordered, pastoral landscapes that so closely mirrored the countryside left behind in Britain. It is no surprise that imported British landbirds thrived in such conditions and today the population densities of Song Thrush, Blackbird, Skylark and Yellowhammer are far greater in New Zealand than they are at home. Other Antipodean species such as Spur-winged Plover (Masked Lapwing), Australasian Harrier and Welcome Swallow benefited from the land clearances and spread across the islands but for every gain there were a dozen losses and during the course of our tour we were to see many examples of the terrible destruction that accompanied the European colonisation of New Zealand.

In contrast to such gloom, our first stop at Muriwai is the scene of a modern conservation triumph, a rapidly growing colony of Australasian Gannets which now numbers many thousands of pairs and has spread from several offshore stacks to the mainland cliffs, extending to within metres of the public viewing positions. Before visiting the colony we ate a picnic lunch in a small information hut which Mark persuaded the Park Ranger to open for us to provide shelter from a spell of persistent rain. During the picnic, Grey Warblers and Tuis caused more excitement than they would on subsequent days, and a selection of thrushes, Goldfinches and Chaffinches tried to convince us that we were really still in Britain. The rain finally eased then Red-billed Gulls and White-fronted Terns competed for attention as we walked down through an avenue of tall New Zealand flax and looked out over the white bodies of the nesting birds. Many of the gannets were tending chicks in their nests whilst others appeared to still be incubating eggs. Like all gannet colonies the scene was one of constant activity and noise, adult birds gliding in from fishing excursions to pitch in the midst of the colony creating renewed commotion with each arrival. It was a perfect way to begin our tour and with the temptation of such tame subjects, many photographs were taken. Apart from the spectacle of the gannet colony, we saw several other birds at this exposed site including Variable Oystercatchers, Welcome Swallow and Pied Cormorant. Several Silvereyes and a Dunnock or two appeared among the flax plants and other species seen in the vicinity included Yellowhammers and some beautiful Sacred Kingfishers.

We ignored the renewed onset of rain and drove to our next destination, Cascade Kauri Park, where a sizeable tract of native forest has been preserved for the recreation and education of Aucklanders. Some damp looking golfers were contemplating their next shots on the adjacent course as we arrived but few other visitors were braving the rain. A number of Eastern Rosellas added splashes of colour to the greens and Purple Swamphens foraged over the grass picking up anything unfortunate enough to cross their path. Our first experience of the ancient Kauri forest was deeply impressive; gnarled and twisted trees festooned with moss and epiphytes rose on

either side of the track forming real life elfin grottos, whilst beautiful tree ferns and palms added varieties of shape and colour to the canopy, the wind bowing the heads of these lesser trees as if in supplication to the aged forest giants which towered above. Amid the trees we met some more typical New Zealand birds; Grey Warblers with their high pitched meandering song, Fantails almost perching on our heads, Tuis making themselves noisily in evidence and exquisite New Zealand Pigeons, one of the most beautiful national representatives of an attractive family. Several Sulphur-crested Cockatoos screeched in pleasure as they spread their wings to catch the falling rain from tree-top perches and once again there were reminders of the UK as Song Thrushes and Blackbirds searched for worms on the undergrowth just as their European cousins would do during such a downfall.

Eventually tiredness triumphed over enthusiasm and we returned to Auckland late-afternoon, remaining awake just long enough to appreciate roadside White-faced Herons, Wild Turkeys, Australasian Harrier, Australian Magpies, fruit trees laden with blossom and gardens filled with gorgeous spring flowers which all helped convince our befuddled brains that we really had swapped winter for early summer!

Day 2

Tuesday 8th November

Refreshed by a good night's sleep we departed after breakfast to visit Miranda where tidal conditions promised a good concentration of waders by midday. Because of the limitations of accommodation on Tiri Tiri Matangi, half of our large group were scheduled to stay on the island overnight whilst the remaining tour members replaced them for the following night which necessitated placing some of our luggage in storage before leaving the hotel.

The hour long drive to Miranda saw a transition from a grey morning to a mostly sunny day, ideally suited for telescope scanning of the inter-tidal mudflats which provide refuge for thousands of shorebirds. The flat, grassy farmland bordering the Firth of Thames are reminiscent of coastal Norfolk but here the wildfowl on roadside ponds were Paradise Shelduck and Black Swans whilst the patrolling harriers Australasian and not Marsh or Hen. The English feel was enhanced by a feeding flock of Greenfinches and Goldfinches which flew up as we approached the Miranda Reserve buildings. The affable warden kindly allowed us later to eat our picnic lunches and brew up hot drinks inside the building, a shrewd move as we then rewarded the hospitality by spending money on books and T Shirts in their well-stocked shop!

Although dark clouds in the distance suggested that other areas were less fortunate, the weather remained fine and sunny as we made our way to edge of the mudflats where thousands of waders were congregated. Before crossing the stile at the entrance to the reserve we had a stroke of luck as two Banded Rails wandered into view on a nearby patch of swamp and gave excellent views as they fussed around two tiny black chicks which could only have been a few days old. The appearance of these impressive birds is by no means a certainty on any New Zealand tour and witnessing this family scene was a real bonus for the group. After this wonderful start we stopped to look at some stilts and a White-faced Heron on a large muddy creek beside the path and soon found several Sharp-tailed Sandpipers feeding in the shelter of some tussocky vegetation at the seaward end of the pool.

Pausing at a shingle bank looking out over the estuary, we spent the next hour or so enjoying the wonderful spectacle in front of us. In the foreground stood Asiatic Golden Plovers, several red tinged New Zealand Dotterel, and a few familiar Turnstone, whilst some distance away, at the edge of the water, were large numbers of Black-billed Gulls, Eastern Bar-tailed Godwits, Knot, Stilts, Variable and South Island Pied Oystercatchers.

As the tide advanced, the waders frequently changed their position and on one occasion, a high-flying Australasian Harrier created mass panic causing nearly all the birds to take wing and circle around before gradually pitching again. A Terek Sandpiper suddenly appeared amid the nearest waders, and just as quickly vanished again whilst several Caspian Terns flew in to settle among the Black-billed Gulls. A solitary Wrybill appeared, one of the birds we most wanted to see at Miranda and whilst never particularly close it offered reasonable telescope views as it picked around on the mud surface with its peculiarly angled bill.

With less and less mud available, sections of the flocks began to fly inland, at first a few individuals then a steady stream of birds, doubtless heading to particular pools or marshy fields where they could sit until the tide retreated. Prior to this exodus many of the godwits and Knot were feeding within a hundred metres of our position and we picked out many ringed individuals, the combinations of colours identifying them to the researchers engaged in monitoring the mind-boggling migrations of these globe-trotters which undertake flights to New Zealand annually from Alaska and Siberia, crossing 7,000 kilometres of sea in probably the longest non-stop journey of any migrant bird. Steve and Alison were particularly interested in the ringing project as members of the Wash wader ringing group which carries out similar research on the Arctic waders wintering in Norfolk, involving different populations of the same two key species.

Hearing reports of more Wrybills at another site along the shore we drove there for a quick look but found only three rather distant birds standing at the tide edge. Several Caspian Terns were nearby and the air was full of Skylark song. Wrybills occur in large numbers at Miranda during the New Zealand winter but are much scarcer during the summer months when most have departed to their breeding areas on the big braided rivers of South Island. Even in November scores can be present at Miranda but on this occasion they proved to be elusive and we were obliged to settle for the one reasonably close view earlier in the morning.

After being entertained by the antics of several harriers as we ate our lunch at the Field Centre, we sped back to Auckland on the busy motorway with an eye on the clock as the Tirri Tirri contingent were to be taken to the island in a 'water taxi' departing from a jetty in the heart of the city. We made it with minutes to spare and those of us travelling to the island scrambled aboard the vessel leaving the rest of the party looking on from the shore. Auckland is a city built around a vast harbour and with communities dotted around on various islands, small boats serve the same function as taxis on the land. This boat was small but powerful and it took just under an hour to reach Tirri although the bumpy journey could hardly be described as comfortable! Mark had joined us for the trip and as we disembarked on the island rushed off to make sure everything was ok at the accommodation while the rest of us meandered our way in the same general direction, pausing to look at the profusion of birdlife.

The 220 hectare island was originally covered with dense stands of native forest but centuries of Maori occupation, and clearance by European farmers transformed the landscape into rolling grassland with just a few pockets of forest remaining. As part of an ongoing programme to help redress some of this destruction, the New Zealand Department of Conservation (DoC) now administer Tiri Tiri Matangi as an open sanctuary and over the years a huge amount of work has been carried out to re-plant the native trees and create conditions into which the various indigenous birds could be once again re-introduced. Tireless efforts by volunteers and DoC staff have been spectacularly successful and today the island is a showcase of what can be achieved once the introduced predators have been removed and the natural vegetation restored. It is indeed a very special place and

with a network of well crafted wooden boardwalks facilitating access to the forests it is the perfect educational centre for interested visitors from Auckland, the skyline of which is incongruously visible to the south!

First stop was at a small pool near the landing stage where a pair of ridiculously tame Brown Teal launched themselves at us to see what food may be on offer. The staff go to great lengths to stop visitors feeding the ostensibly wild creatures on the island but many disregard this rule and the scavenging teal were an example of what happens. Charming little ducks, these teal are among the rarest wildfowl in the world but the authenticity of this pair seemed a little suspect as they scabbled around our feet!

Beautiful Red-crowned Parakeets at least behaved more like wild birds as they flew in to feed in the flax plants then as we continued on our way it very quickly apparent what was in store for us as dozens of Tui and Bellbirds appeared on every side, their fluty calls filling the air. A huge Takahe lumbered into view beside the track, blinked at us in a disinterested manner then continued cropping the vegetation. This primitive looking flightless relation of the Purple Swamphen, was on a downward spiral to extinction in its montane South Island homeland but captive breeding and release on protected islands such as TiriTiri has given this ancient species a chance to survive, although such weighty matters didn't seem to worry this individual as it munched away at the grasses. Later we would see several others near the HQ but always watched them at a respectable distance, partly because it doesn't help for the birds to become too confiding but also for the very good reason that Takahe's possess an enormous beak and can be quite bad-tempered on occasions (doubtless the strain of being almost extinct!). A number of Pukeko also strolled around the same grassy area outside our accommodation, just as confiding but rather less menacing!

Once installed in the bunkhouse, which we were to share with the research staff, we visited the new garden area just below the still-functioning 19th century lighthouse but failed to find the pair of Kokako seen there earlier by the warden. Mark had returned to Auckland but Alice skilfully commandeered the kitchen ahead of the researchers and much earlier than expected we were tucking in to a fine selection of food preceded by a warming bowl of soup. No sooner had the washing up been completed than it was time to go out in search of kiwis and with torches suitably shielded by red cellophane I led an intrepid expedition into the night. I tried first an area that had been productive in 2003 but there was not a sound at this spot so we set off downhill through the forest. The crunching of our feet on the gravel made it hard to hear the noises of the night so we eventually turned off the main track and made our way along the Wattle Trail which took us through the heart of the forest. My heart sank as this also proved to be devoid of night creatures but just as I had resigned myself to failure the piercing whistle of a male kiwi close by in the forest brought us to a sudden halt. Even then I did not feel optimistic about seeing the caller but suddenly there it was, standing in the middle of the trail only metres away, a superb Little Spotted Kiwi, one of the most prized inhabitants of Tiri Tiri. For a breathless few moments the bird stood there, bathed in red light from the torches, then turned away and sauntered off into the forest undergrowth. The whole encounter had lasted no more than a few minutes but it left us in high spirits and we returned to the Bunkhouse chattering about our experience. I would like to say that it was the elation from the sighting that later kept my companions awake but I fear it was my snoring which eventually forced Simon to seek the refuge of the garden!

Day 3

Wednesday 9th November

We stumbled outside in half-light at about 5am to listen to a dawn chorus like no other we had ever heard. The native bird song resounded through the forest but overlaid with this was the contribution from the European species adding a surreal quality to the sound. It had been a clear night and the air felt distinctly nippy but everything was soon warmed by the rising sun. We chose to follow the Wattle Trail again and with early morning activity at a peak quickly met with most of the island residents. Whiteheads were among the noisiest and most conspicuous of the inhabitants but it was the abundant Tuis and the equally common Bellbirds that constituted the loudest components of the dawn chorus. Saddlebacks and Red-crowned Parakeets were also very vocal whilst other forest birds maintained a quieter presence such as the tame little New Zealand Robins and the constantly active Fantails. Endearing Australian Brown Quail were regularly met along the trails and often behaved in a totally fearless manner which would without doubt lead to their very rapid demise if predators ever reach the island. After a few false starts we did eventually obtain close views of a feeding Kokako but we would have to wait a few days before hearing the extraordinary jumble of noises that pass as song in the Kokako world! By the time we returned to the Bunkhouse for breakfast we had seen most of the Tirri Tirri land-birds except Stitchbird which for some reason failed to appear at the usual forest feeding station. Later the combined group would see many in the forests on the western side of the island during a walk led by Mark but none obliged along the Wattle trail.

The rest of the party arrived with Mark on the daily ferry from Auckland and Gulf Harbour which disgorged a considerable number of excited schoolchildren as well as the Naturetrek team. As I watched the teachers organizing their charges I reflected that my own school outings had been to rather less enjoyable venues such as the local telephone exchange and an engineering factory! With great timing a ray swam into view beneath the jetty as the passengers disembarked but it soon vanished into deeper water. After the hubbub subsided around the wharf, Mark led the now united group on a walk along the western side of the island but the writer somehow contrived to lose contact with everyone and I found myself tagging along with a crocodile of children paying respects to the Brown Teal. I waited around for some while in expectation of finding the group but eventually I realized this was not going to happen and made my way back to the Bunkhouse. Several hours later the walkers returned and tucked into a picnic lunch prepared on the lawn. They had seen most of the expected species during their hike including the Stitchbirds and several Blue Penguins occupying concrete nest boxes along the shoreline.

Mark, and the first overnights left with the schoolchildren on the afternoon ferry leaving me with the headache of repeating the kiwi success for the newcomers. More immediately we tried again to see a Spotless Crake on the Brown Teal pool having failed with an earlier vigil. This time the attractive little crake was more obliging and treated us to a fine display which twice included walking along a bare log in open view. Before it appeared, the teal paid a visit to check us out and then returned to the water in disgust. A warm afternoon passed with further views of the Tirri birds and the appearance of a few butterflies including one rather like the Small Copper of Europe.

Alice performed wonders again in the kitchen and the second night dinner was just as tasty as the first. There was rather more competition from the researchers this evening but we still finished our meal in good time to commence the kiwi quest which I began with some trepidation about matching the success of the previous night. The walk began in similar fashion with no sound from the first areas visited then astonishingly at almost exactly

the same spot along the Wattle trail we met with a single kiwi standing on the track. It was a fairly brief encounter and unfortunately Steve, who had done a 'Captain Oates' and moved away from the group because of a distracting cough, arrived back too late to see the bird. There followed a tense hour as we waited in darkness for a return visit, then suddenly a close whistle announced the arrival of a male kiwi and within minutes we were all watching this bizarre creature grubbing about in the leaf debris just metres from our position. This individual (was it the same one?) seemed unconcerned and foraged around for some minutes before trundling off into the forest leaving us ecstatic at the closeness and length of the views. Steve looked particularly happy at his reprieve as we made our way back to the Bunkhouse. Continuing the Captain Oates theme I slept outside to spare the others my snoring and was in return woken up at regular intervals as people made their way to the toilets! This did ensure I was awake when a Morepork began calling at 0315 but I could not raise the enthusiasm to go looking for it!

Day 4

Thursday 10th November

The new arrivals had seen most of the Tirri Tirri birds except the Kokado but this was remedied after breakfast when a pair appeared in the trees behind the new gardens and then offered wonderful close-ups feeding in flax plants beside the road. Earlier, we followed the now-familiar Wattle trail before breakfast and marvelled at the work that had gone into the construction of the boardwalks which meander for hundreds of metres through the forest. Tui's and Bellbirds again occurred in abundance, tamely feeding just metres away, but soon we met with other species; twittering flocks of Whiteheads moving through the undergrowth, big, thrush-like Saddlebacks, Fantails and a single Stitchbird near the feeder. Other more familiar birds were also met during our walk including Song Thrush, Blackbird, Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Yellowhammer. The process of re-introducing native wildlife is still continuing, with Fernbird and Tuatara among the most recent but both are rarely seen by visitors. Amazingly tame New Zealand Robins, Brown Quail scurrying along the paths, more Red-crowned Parakeets, New Zealand Pigeon and Silvereye completed a fine selection of birds and even the surly Takahe came to witness our departure from the island, making one last determined effort to peck someone! It was sad to leave after a truly extraordinary few days but Mark was waiting for us on Auckland waterfront and a chartered water taxi came out to collect us at 10. As we waited by the jetty, Sacred Kingfishers and Welcome Swallows, both with nests nearby, presented wonderful views and posed for photographs. The Brown Teal also rushed out of the pond in a final attempt to elicit scraps but returned to the water disappointed.

The journey back to Auckland was no less bumpy than the outward trip but conditions were ideal with an almost flat sea and clear blue sky. Returning in this way provided a superb panorama of the Auckland buildings, particularly in the final stages as we headed into the heart of the city. The coach was parked conveniently close to the jetty and already contained the rest of the group who were keen to hear about our second night kiwi exploits. After some re-packing of the luggage trailer and a few admin duties, Mark was ready to begin the long drive south and we set off for the next stage of the tour.

It was a pleasantly warm day and the steady progress along excellent roads induced a degree of head-nodding at times and a few outbreaks of snoring. This was even more noticeable as temperatures crept upwards but fortunately Mark remained as alert as ever and we reached our destination safely by early-afternoon. Rotorua is something of a tourist magnet, a geothermal wonderland of steaming hot lakes, bubbling mud pools and spouting geysers which has a strong Maori identity dating back to the 14th century. The earth is in restless mode here and even in the well ordered and tidy streets of the town, clouds of steam hiss upwards from unlikely places

like so many boiling kettles. The region also boasts many freshwater lakes and we stopped by the shore of Lake Rotorua to see what birds we could find. Rafts of New Zealand Scaup were bobbing on the water, a preening New Zealand Dabchick was 'telescoped' at close quarters and scores of Black Swans sailed out on the lake. A tree in the shallows was covered with nesting Little Shags adding their own fishy perfume to the distinctly sulphurous odour of the Rotorua atmosphere. Many of the nests held well grown young and a few Little Black Shags nearby presented a good opportunity to compare the two species. Other local nesters included a large colony of Red-billed Gulls and many Southern Greater Black-backs.

Legs stretched, and new birds ticked, we boarded the coach and continued our afternoon exploration with a visit to a primeval looking mud pool. The grey-brown surface of the pool was pock-marked with numerous pulsating craters of varying size, which contracted and then expanded with a satisfying gurgling noise scattering droplets of mud in a wide arc with each eruption. Some of these mini-volcanoes were only the size of a coin, others a metre or so in diameter and the cumulative affect was of a vast mud-pie being heated over a hidden underground flame. Suitably impressed we made our way to Taupo for the first of two nights. Like Rotorua, this resort is also situated on the shores of a lake and has become a popular centre for fishing, watersports and for observing geothermal activity. Classed as the largest lake in Australasia, the 600 sqkm Lake Taupo occupies the drowned crater of a volcano which exploded many thousands of years ago demonstrating the seismic volatility of this region. Revered in Maori culture, it is a place of considerable natural beauty with the hills of the Tongariro National Park forming a backdrop to the south. We were soon installed in our comfortable motel on the shore of the lake, and were delighted to discover the bonus of large tubs in each room which filled with piping hot, and allegedly energising, water from the underground resources. The outdoor swimming pool was similarly heated and enjoyed by some of the party. A short stroll to a nearby hotel was necessary to obtain an evening meal but the food was worth the walk and left us planning what to order the next night in the same restaurant.

Day 5

Friday 11th November

Today was to be the only really early start of the tour but we were granted an extra hour in bed in view of the good views that everyone had obtained of Kokako on Tirri Tirri.. The purpose of the planned dawn strike had been to reach at first light a tract of forest which had somehow escaped the axe and was now a reserve where some of the last remaining Kokako could be found.

The drive from Taupo took us through areas of farmland which once again recalled the UK but the strange shape of the hills and rock formation indicated their volcanic origins. Rabbits were quite numerous and sadly also featured among the numerous roadside casualties which also regularly included the much despised Brush-tailed Possum. During the course of the tour we noted quite a range of road-kill species including many Australian Magpies and several harriers, all no doubt killed whilst attempting to feed on other road victims without paying due attention to the speeding traffic.

Despite the delayed start we reached the forest at a reasonable hour and were greeted by several Kaka uttering their screeching rattles as they flew over the trees. We heard, or saw these endemic parrots several times during our visit but on each occasion it was only in flight and they seemed particularly wary. We ate a picnic breakfast close to the regular Kokako site and the distant sound of organ pipes confirmed that the bird was still present. As we waited; noisy Yellow-crowned Parakeets, beautiful New Zealand Pigeons, Bellbirds, Tuis, Grey Warblers, Fantails, Silvereyes, Whiteheads and even a handsome Tomtit appeared in the surrounding vegetation and a

short walk into the mysterious world of the ancient podocarp forest was rewarded by close views of several inquisitive New Zealand Robins. The mighty trees, covered in mosses and epiphytes, were of impressive stature and admixed with numerous tree ferns created a forest interior unique to New Zealand. As on every field outing in New Zealand, we also recorded many familiar British species which today included a number of Common Redpolls, a finch that has clearly done well in its adopted country and from this morning onwards became a regular sight or sound each day.

Eventually the resident Kokako began to call from the canopy at the forest edge and after some searching we managed to spot the calling bird amid the foliage and set up a telescope. Fortunately this increasingly rare endemic was in no hurry to move and everyone enjoyed views before it retreated into cover only to appear again later in the morning. The Kokako is one of the many native birds with an uncertain future but hopefully if the worst happens, the introduced populations on places like Tiri Tiri will preserve the species. Watching this attractive, blue-chinned bird running through his repertoire of squeaks and whistles, it was a sobering thought that even today, the security of these forests is still not guaranteed and there are individuals who would happily consign the Kokako to history for a short-term financial gain.

During the breakfast picnic both Shining and Long-tailed Cuckoos put in appearances, the latter first detected by its calls from the edge of the forest then seen flying overhead. The Shining Cuckoo was far more co-operative and responded well to Mark's tape, perching in open view and eventually approaching to within a few metres of an appreciative audience. There are few more attractive land birds on the New Zealand list and we greatly enjoyed this extrovert performance.

After another showing by the Kokako we drove a short distance to the picnic tables and toilet block which marked the public entrance to the forest and strolled around a loop boardwalk through the adjacent area of forest giving another chance to admire the podocarps and to absorb the ethereal quality of this woodland. Although relatively quiet for birds, a few Kaka raucously announced their presence and in the forest interior we saw New Zealand Robin, Grey Warblers and a number of Fantails. Moving on to a lunch stop at another part of the National Park we enjoyed another Mark/Alice picnic whilst a New Zealand Falcon circled overhead and Green Frogs chirped from the river below. A short walk through the forest after the meal produced nice views of a handsome male Tomtit catching flies above the swirling waters of the river.

Next on our agenda was a tour of the geothermal attractions of the 'Craters of the Moon' not far from Taupo. This rather low-key tourist site is one of the more recent areas of thermal activity, evidenced as we wandered along a circular path through the valley, by various steaming fissures and craters culminating in a particularly impressive gash in the ground with a bubbling pool in the bottom fed by steaming liquid from a hole in the rock. The birdwatching content of this walk was fairly limited but we did enjoy close views of flock of Spur-winged Plovers toasting their feet amid the somewhat surreal landscape.

Leaving the craters to hiss and bubble for the next visitors we returned to Taupo but before retiring for the day, Mark took us to a popular waterfall just outside the town where the Waikato River suddenly narrows to a chasm less than 15 metres across and pours over an 11 metre ledge to boil furiously in a deep semi-circular basin. A lot of people were admiring the crashing torrent but it seemed a bit artificial to me and I was glad to leave after a short visit. Back at the motel a good soak in the thermal tub washed away the grime of the day and revived us for

the evening meal which proved to be just as tasty as before, albeit eaten in a restaurant crowded with diners in contrast to the emptiness of the previous night.

Day 6

Saturday 12th November

This morning we enjoyed the luxury of breakfast served in our rooms by the obliging motel manager and some of the party took to the outdoor thermal pool encouraged by the sunny start to the day with a clear blue sky overhead. Today we were heading into the higher elevations of the Tongariro National Park and we knew that the weather might not be quite so benign in this area of snow-capped volcanoes and heather moorland.

We packed the luggage into the trailer and set off south, running parallel with the shores of Lake Taupo for the first part of the journey. Before leaving the Lake behind we paid a customary diversion to a small area of marsh to hopefully see the resident Fernbirds and this was duly accomplished with ease as the often elusive skulker responded instantly to Mark's tape and came to within a few metres to investigate the source. An odd-looking bird, with long spiky tail feathers, it is reminiscent of several different species rolled into one but perhaps most resembled one of the prinia tribe. Several Fernbirds were living in this patch of swamp and we saw three or four individuals as well as numerous Redpolls and an all too brief glimpse of a Bittern flying along the lake edge.

As we continued south, the road swung away from the lake and we began to climb into the hills, eventually entering a different landscape of open moorland dominated by the snow-capped peaks of Mounts Ngaurahoe and Ruapehu. This was the computer enhanced setting of Mount Doom and Mordor in the film trilogy of Lord of the Rings and it was somehow appropriate that as we approached the mountains, a halo of cloud obscured the summits. Our accommodation for two nights was in the small ski-resort village of Whakapapa at the dreadfully named Skotel Alpine Resort which proved to be one of the nicest, and possibly most luxurious, of all the tour hotels. Before testing out our rooms, we joined Mark for a walk along a nature trail at the edge of the village which meandered through a fine tract of forest overlooking a fast flowing river. Grey Warblers were much in evidence here and we were delighted to find a pair of Riflemen, tiny, goldcrest-like creatures flitting through the canopy and creeping up mossy trunks in search of insects.

We ate a picnic lunch in the car-park before installing ourselves at the Skotel then boarded the coach again for an excursion into the heart of Tongariro. The weather, which had been so kind to us over the preceding days, was looking distinctly unpromising as we set off but improved later as we entered a stretch of interesting country which recalled central Wales in the overall green aspect of sheep filled pastures intersected by fast flowing, boulder strewn streams. The hills though were distinctly conical betraying their volcanic origins and in place of oaks were stands of native trees. It looked perfect for Dippers and Buzzards but instead we saw Yellowhammers galore, Sacred Kingfishers and Australian Magpies. Eventually we reached a spot where Mark forecast that we might find the rare Blue Duck and within a short while he was proved correct as a pair of these unusual wildfowl appeared near a bend in the river several hundred metres away. It was soon apparent that they were guarding two well grown ducklings and as we watched through our telescopes, the tough youngsters showed no hesitation in plunging into the torrent, disappearing from view then springing up onto a convenient rock. These ducks are specially adapted for life in such conditions but even so it seemed a harsh existence for the young birds. It was a very satisfying and prolonged encounter which also proved to be a very fortunate one as we failed to locate any other ducks despite a careful scan along several kilometres of river. It was raining again as we returned to

Whakapapa and for most (if not all) the group the attractions of the Skotel dispelled enthusiasm for any further birdwatching.

Day 7

Monday 13th November

Once again we were moving on and this time it was a longer drive than usual as we headed towards Wellington and the ferry crossing to South Island. Ron and Joyce saw the best bird of the morning when they looked out of their room to observe a dark-phase New Zealand Falcon perched close by but sadly the rest of the group were not so fortunate!

A mid-morning coffee stop introduced us to a splendid establishment called the Brown Sugar which typified the many excellent tea shops and cafes that seem to be a feature of every New Zealand town. Each one we visited was filled with tempting looking things to eat and it is perhaps surprising that few of the locals display much evidence of obesity! Suitably re-fuelled we continued south but stopped again an hour or so later to walk beside the Ramgitike River, a good locality to look for Black-fronted Dotterel, a relatively recent but increasing immigrant from Australia. It had become quite windy, creating annoying dust clouds along the riverbank but we quickly found an immature Banded Dotterel at the river edge, and some careful telescope scanning by Steve eventually revealed a single Black-fronted Dotterel on a shingle peninsula near a group of stilts. It was a singularly difficult bird to pick out amid the grey stones but everyone finally managed to obtain views of this handsome wader before pressure of time compelled us to return. Another two Banded Plovers along the river were glimpsed during the visit.

We ate lunch at a nearby café run by an amiable old hippy with a friendly line in banter. The large garden at the rear of the building was filled with cuddly rabbits and a miscellany of chickens, mostly in cages but including two bold hens which wandered around hovering up any fallen scraps as we ate our meals. Despite the persistent wind it was a very pleasant lunch stop and the owner seemed genuinely pleased to welcome us.

Another brief stop at the Foxton Estuary was thwarted by the extremely low condition of the tide but despite acres of mud we did pick out 4 or 5 Royal Spoonbills, Caspian Tern, 50+ Bar-tailed Godwits, 5 Knot and a lone Wrybill far away at the tide edge. From here our route took us past places with exotic Maori names such as Waikawa Beach and Te Horo until we joined the motorway network feeding in to Wellington. With little time in hand, Mark took us straight to the Ferry Terminal, which was the kind of modern, clean and efficiently organised building that we had come to expect in New Zealand. The incoming ferry arrived at almost the same time and we did not have long to wait before the commencement of boarding was announced. The vessel, which had several deck levels and accommodated an impressive number of vehicles, was quickly loaded and we departed on time for the three hour sailing to South Island. A moderate wind was blowing, adding a wind-chill factor to the distinctly cool air, but we found sheltered corners to maintain a more or less constant watch for most of the crossing although we all spent varying amounts of time inside the cabins, not least to eat an evening meal which today consisted of simple fare purchased from the busy restaurant. Before too long we began to pick up a few seabirds beginning with a few fairly distant albatrosses, which were almost certainly Salvin's, a Giant Petrel and a few Australasian Gannets. As the voyage continued we met with small numbers of Flesh-footed Shearwaters, several Sooty Shearwaters and more albatrosses which again appeared to be Salvin's (or Shy). Nearing South Island, bird activity increased substantially and species seen included Fluttering Shearwaters and the first Fairy Prions displaying black 'w's' on their pale grey wings rather like juvenile Little Gulls. Light was

rapidly fading as we entered the steep sided fjords leading eventually to Picton, but we could still see masses of Red-billed Gulls on their rocky colonies and a number of shags in flight which were almost certainly Spotted.

It did not take long to disembark onto South Island and once ashore we drove in darkness to the town of Blenheim where accommodation awaited at the splendid Chateau Marlborough Motel which we reached at about 10pm for a somewhat later bedtime than usual.

Day 8

Tuesday 14th November

Once again we had the luxury of breakfast in our rooms before returning to Picton and heading to the nearby small hamlet of Waikawa where we boarded the charter boat 'Playmate' for a cruise in Marlborough Sound on a fairly pleasant morning with relatively calm sea conditions.

Fluttering Shearwaters were encountered almost as soon as we reached the open water and presented close up views as we sailed past rafts of birds floating on the sea. Spotted Shags flew by and several of the rarer King Shags were observed swimming low in the water. We had only been under way a short while when a flurry of activity near the shore indicated a feeding pod of dolphins surrounded by a hundred or more Fluttering Shearwaters and some plunge-diving Australasian Gannets. Our skipper quickly homed in on the spot and we drifted into the heart of the feeding frenzy with numerous Dusky Dolphins scything through the water in pursuit of unseen fish all around the boat. As we scrambled about taking photographs of the dolphins and the rafts of shearwaters only metres away, a rare Hector's Dolphin apparently swam underneath the vessel but unfortunately none of the group saw it! Eventually the fish shoal fled to deeper water in the middle of the Sound taking the dolphins with them and we continued our journey towards the open sea, at length reaching somewhat choppier waters at the confluence of the Cook Strait and Pacific Ocean. Turning to the east, where upwellings from a deep water trench provided rich feeding for seabirds, we soon met with some of these enigmatic ocean birds as Giant Petrels, Salvin's Albatrosses, Flesh-footed Shearwaters and a few Sooty Shearwaters appeared along with Common Diving Petrels whirring along like Little Auks but numbers were not great and we were a little disappointed at the lack of prions. As we ploughed on across the mouth of the Sound the sea conditions were even rougher and the calmer waters around a rock stack with 30+ King Shags on it came as a welcome respite after being tossed about. The taxonomy regarding the various forms of King Shag is complex and subject to much debate but whether a race or a full species, this particular bird is extremely rare and confined to Marlborough Sounds. From here we powered back towards Waikawa but en route paid a brief visit to a conservation island where South Island Saddlebacks collecting nest material, New Zealand Robins and a few Bellbirds were seen in the course of a ten minute walk up and then down a flight of steps leading up from the jetty. We arrived back at Waikawa soon after one pm and adjourned to nearby Picton for lunch in a busy restaurant. In a sense the cruise had peaked early with the exciting dolphins but the morning bird list included a few surprises such as the trio of Arctic Skuas which flew over the boat and a pair of Californian Quail trundling through the car park shrubbery!

Eventually we left Picton and drove back to pick up our luggage trailer from the motel before continuing south along the coast. This is one of the principal wine growing areas in New Zealand, and the evidence was easy to see as we drove past numerous vineyards along the route. New Zealand agriculture is adapting rapidly to changes in demand and this has witnessed a transition from traditional sheep rearing to many new enterprises such as wine producing, deer farming and even Ostriches, all of which we passed by during our tour of South Island.

The climate here in the Marlborough district is ideally suited to quality wine making and it seemed many landowners were capitalising on the growing market for New Zealand wines.

The characteristic roadside birds of South Island seemed much as the north and we were soon noting Australasian Harriers, Pukeko, Spur-winged Plovers, Skylark, Welcome Swallows, Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, Australian Magpies, Starlings and various finches, much as before but one bird we had left behind was the Indian Myna which surprisingly has not crossed the Cook Strait yet. A comfort stop at a beach-side cafe allowed a leg-stretch beside the ocean then later we pulled off the road to admire some hundred or more New Zealand Fur Seals sprawled over rocks at the edge of the sea. This was a popular observation spot with information boards telling visitors about the animals' life-history and we were joined by several locals as we stood watching the antics of these amusing creatures which seem to delight in floating through the shallows, waving their flippers in the air. Most of the seals were males ranging in size from tiny pups from the previous season to almost full grown beach-masters snorting and gaping at each other in typically bellicose fashion. A colony of Spotted Shags on the cliffs provided superb telescope views of a bird hitherto only seen in flight or on the sea. One of the most attractive of all the cormorants, these handsome seabirds are yet another of the New Zealand endemics and a welcome sight around most of the coasts we visited on South Island.

The aptly named Alpine View Motel at Kaikoura afforded super views of the snow-topped mountains of the Seaward Kaikoura Range behind the town and after settling in to our rooms a stroll onto the beach produced at least five Banded Dotterel which included parents trying to protect tiny chicks from the wheels of passing motor cycles roaring up and down the sand.

We dined at an organic restaurant at the edge of town and after a splendid meal walked back to the motel by moonlight, attempting to figure out the location of the Southern Cross among the myriad of stars.

Day 9

Wednesday 15th November

Mark stayed behind to tend to some vehicle maintenance (and relax!) while the rest of us embarked on a three hour cruise in search of seabirds. The small vessels used for these pelagics had an impressive turn of speed when needed but this was not a morning for long sea trips indeed most of our observations were carried out at two main areas, neither more than a few kilometres from land. Divided among two boats because of the party size, we set off together but unfortunately the boat I was on had to quickly turn back because of a mechanical fault. Our hearts sank at the possible scenario unravelling before us but as soon as we reached the jetty, a cheerful mechanic sporting shorts and a Crocodile Dundee hat leapt aboard, thrust a screwdriver a couple of times into the bowels of the port engine and pronounced the fault fixed. Breathing collective sighs of relief, we started off again and were soon passing rafts of Hutton's Shearwaters, one of the local specialities which amazingly are only known to breed high in the Kaikoura mountains! Surprisingly (in view of the similarity in illustrations) the birds seemed quite distinct from the Fluttering Shearwaters seen on the preceding day being noticeably blacker especially on the underwing. A few Cape Pigeons joined us early in the journey and followed in the wake as we raced to where the ocean floor shelves steeply to a great depth creating an upwelling of plankton and other food for the seabirds. We cut engines and released some of our disgusting mix of fish offal which immediately attracted a squabbling mass of birds around our boat. The next hour or so was sheer birding pleasure as we gazed in wonder at the magnificent array of species which included at least 20 Wandering (Gibson's), 80+ Salvin's and one Black-browed Albatross, Giant Petrels, 50+ Pintado Petrels (Cape Pigeon), 40+ Westland Black Petrels

and an assortment of gulls. As the gigantic Wanderers scabbled over the scraps just a metre or so from the stern of the ship, much film was expended and everyone had big grins on their faces. At such close range the Wandering Albatross is indeed a huge bird and watching the long, thin wings unfurl it was mind-boggling to contemplate the many thousand miles of ocean roaming each bird must have experienced. A Royal Albatross briefly settled on the sea but kept a distance from the boat as if not wanting to mix with the squabbling, noisy horde of Wanderers and Salvin's that surrounded us. It was amid these wonderful seabirds that I heard a mobile telephone ring and expected it to belong to the skipper only to see Chris produce his phone from a bag and answer with the never-to-be-forgotten 'Hello -I'm on a boat (pause) looking at albatrosses' When we discovered that the call was from the UK to ascertain what time his taxi had to be at Heathrow it made the episode even more surreal!

We wanted to stay for ever but our skipper was anxious to try another area and we sped off to the new location dragging with us a trail of birds hoping that we might release more 'chum'. Once again the engines were cut and the bait released with much the same results as before. Visitors included White-chinned, Sooty and Short-tailed Shearwaters, and an elegant Buller's Shearwater which looked like a racehorse among carthorses as it glided gracefully among the throng. This individual stayed with us for the rest of the trip although I didn't observe it eating any of the chum. The rest of the group joined us for a while and shouted insults across the water as we enjoyed the euphoria of this very special occasion.

All too soon it was time to head back although not before visiting rocky islets just offshore where nesting shags and more Fur Seals rounded off a superb morning for the occupants of the other boat. We were not to be so lucky as the starboard engine suddenly chose to seize up with a frightening clunk (frightening for me as I was sat on it at the time!) and instead of joining the others we limped back to port on half power. We were all just so glad that the failure happened on the way back and not the start!

We were re-united with Mark for lunch at the crowded 'Whaleway Station' in Kaikoura where we were joined by Mark's partner Elizabeth and bade temporary farewell to Alice who was leaving to drive another Nature Quest coach from Dunedin up to Auckland- typical holiday activity for a New Zealand student! It was sad to see Alice leave but nice to welcome Elizabeth who would be with us for the next week. It was a scorching hot summer's day and lunch at the edge of the beach was a pleasant interlude between sea outings.

Later in the afternoon we made our way to the check-in desks for a whale-watching trip due to leave at 4pm. The forecast of a rising wind threatened to jeopardise the operation but we finally received a green light and joined 15 or 20 other tourists to be taken by coach to the embarkation jetty close to where we had started the seabird pelagic. The style of the whale trip was very different and clearly tailored for a more general market but it was professionally executed even if many of the aspects were personally annoying. The skipper used the great power of the vessel to take us quickly to the area where the resident Sperm Whales had last been sighted and then by a stop start process tried to follow the underwater progress of the animal by lowering a hydrophone over the side and listening. While this cat and mouse chase took us from one spot to another, the 'cruise guide' subjected us to a stream of facts and figures in the main cabin, using computer graphics on a screen to illustrate each piece of information. Fortunately the first encounter occurred early in the trip and the cry 'thar he blows', or something similar, caused a rush to the deck and deployment of cameras. The young male Sperm Whale ploughed through the waves for some 10 minutes, recharging his lungs, then with a wave of the tail dived once more into the 1,000 foot depths of the underwater canyon where he could remain submerged for up to 45 minutes hunting squid.

During the next hour we had two more whale sightings each concluded with the signature wave of tail flukes so familiar from posters. Although focused very much on the whales the excursion, which goes much further offshore than the seabird pelagics, did produce plenty of seabird sightings including Royal, Wandering and Salvin's Albatrosses, Cape Pigeons and Giant Petrels.

Apart from those passengers who were intent on studying the inside of paper bags, most seemed satisfied with the success of the afternoon and we returned to port. I found it a strangely unsatisfying outing but I suppose we had been spoilt by the superb morning trip and anything else was an anti-climax.

Day 10

Thursday 16th November

As we prepared for the next long drive across to the west coast, we speculated whether the fine conditions at Kaikoura would prevail in the mountains and Mark grinned that the TV forecast suggested otherwise! Before leaving the town we paid a brief visit to the foot of the mountains where previous groups had enjoyed views of a roosting Morepork. The owl was not at home but we did see a lovely Shining Cuckoo which posed perfectly for us and Harriers quartering over the fields were the first of a dozen or more during the day. A raft of Hutton's Shearwaters on the sea south of Kaikoura was unfortunately in a difficult position to see from the road although we did pause briefly at a convenient car park to scan over the rocky shore for Reef Herons and explore the rock pools.

After several hours of driving we turned off the main road near Cheviot to visit St Anne's Lagoon, a small wildfowl refuge containing a reed fringed lake which made a good setting for an early picnic lunch. An assortment of wildfowl included New Zealand Shovelers, New Zealand Scaup, Black Swans and Grey Teal, many with young of varying sizes. A distant pair of Cape Barren Geese ushered two goslings to join a small group of Canada Geese on a grassy knoll, the former an introduced bird found mainly, and perhaps exclusively, in this area. Australian Coot were present on the lake whilst land-birds providing entertainment during lunch included several Harriers, Silvereyes, Redpolls and Fantails.

From Cheviot the route took us through towns with familiar names such as Amberley, Oxford and Springfield (!) as we skirted Christchurch to the north before entering the mountains. Lake Pearson produced two Great Crested (Australasian Crested) Grebes and several Canada Geese. As the road wound its way through Arthur's Pass the mountains looked stunning and it was easy to understand why this area is one of the most popular in New Zealand for hiking, or 'tramping' as it is known colloquially. It was in the settlement of Arthur's Pass that we met our first Keas, typically loitering around near the dustbins of the tourist office and only too happy to pose for photographs at a few metres range. Unfortunately the versatile Keas have long discovered that man is an easy touch for food scraps and many hang around popular tourist sites looking for hand outs like so many city centre beggars. Apparently the diet is often fatal for birds adapted to eating montane fruits but tourists rarely resist giving them food and thus the habit continues. Today there were no visitors in the streets and the Arthur's Pass Keas were resorting to trying to raid the rubbish bins and standing disconsolate outside the few eating establishments. They are truly spectacular parrots and it was very sad to see them living this lingering death.

At the windy summit of Arthur's Pass we paused for a while to admire some fine stands of Mount Cook Lily (actually the world's largest buttercup and not a lily at all) then began the long downhill plunge to the Tasman coast finally arriving at our hotel in Hokitika by late afternoon. Hokitika was once the centre of a thriving jade

industry and something of a boom town but it is now a faded shadow of its former glory and brought to mind one of those neglected frontier towns much beloved in the old westerns. The hotel was comfortable enough and we settled in for a one night stay.

Day 11

Friday 17th November

Some of the group went off on an early morning jade purchasing mission while the rest of us enjoyed a leisurely breakfast in a café where the waitress didn't show a lot of enthusiasm for her job! Driving south on the next leg of our journey the road initially ran close to the sea and once again the landscape was reminiscent of East Anglia. Waterfowl included many Black Swans, some with cygnets, many Paradise Shelduck and a few New Zealand Scaup whilst numerous Pukeko's wandered about in roadside fields. A Great Egret standing in a river with a White-faced Heron was to be the only sighting of the tour and remarkably close to the spot where my group saw a lone bird in 2003. This big heron has a world wide range but in New Zealand, where it is called Kotuku, numbers are small although the main breeding colony is not very far from this location. Not very much further along the road another sudden stop and three point turn was called for to look at a Weka beside the highway. This peculiar flightless rail is another of the highly vulnerable New Zealand endemics combining a fearless nature with the build of a chicken to produce the perfect fodder for predators. It is astonishing that any survive on the mainland but they are not uncommon along the coastal strip and this individual seemed happy enough working his way along a fence line picking up insect prey from the grass.

Soon the highway took us past the impressive snowy peaks of the Southern Alps and we paused briefly to visit the Fox Glacier. The car park was full of fellow tourists and we lingered just long enough to take some photographs from the first convenient vantage points. In fact neither of the retreating glaciers in this area is particularly impressive in global terms but they are easily accessible and must once have made an imposing spectacle when they extended much lower than they do today.

Pressing onwards, we diverted off the main road to pay a brief visit to the Westland National Park where we also ate a picnic lunch prepared by the new team of Elizabeth and Mark. A Fernbird offered excellent views in response to taped calls as we walked along a boardwalk through a swamp and in the nearby forest, birdlife included Grey Warblers and one or two Fantails of the all-black South Island form.

By the time we reached our overnight accommodation, Wilderness Lodge at Lake Moeraki, it was mid-afternoon and we wasted no time in taking the forest walk to Monro Beach. The forest was an extremely impressive mix of ancient native trees and tree ferns but we were aware of the time constraint of a 7.30 evening meal and kept a brisk pace to reach the beach as quickly as possible. Despite this some birds were seen in the forest including Fantails, Silvereyes and one or two Tomtits. The walk took about 40 minutes and we finally emerged from the trees on to the edge of a sandy cove bordered by low cliffs. This is one of the best spots to see the rare Fiordland Crested Penguin and we settled down to await their appearance, trying to ignore the attentions of biting sandflies. For a while the only birds to watch were some Shy Albatrosses gliding offshore but just when we began to fear failure, a penguin suddenly struggled ashore from the surf and stood comically on the beach as if undecided what to do. Later, other individuals came ashore from fishing expeditions, swimming as close as they could get to the beach amid the crashing waves then just like surfers, judging the right wave to 'ride' ashore whereupon they had to waddle rapidly up the beach to avoid being swept out again by the next wave. Most birds had to make several attempts before they reached land and it was clearly no easy task in these rough conditions.

Having seen about four birds we rushed back to the lodge where we were welcomed to dinner by the Assistant Manager Sude, a somewhat striking gentleman with perma-tan skin and a flamboyant taste in clothing which tonight included white trousers held up by multi-coloured braces and white shoes. He looked like a Mississippi gambler but proved to be an amiable host and I discovered later that he spends part of each year working on Alaskan fishing boats so he is clearly tougher than first impressions suggested.

The lodge is situated in a wonderful location beside a tumbling stream surrounded by forest and offers a range of activities for guests but we were probably a little more independent than many of their visitors hence our decision to set out on a night walk fifteen minutes before the scheduled Lodge walk led by Sude. In the event Isabelle and Pat turned out to be Sude's only guests and he took them to see the extraordinary collection of glow-worms found near the lodge. Our party concentrated on trying to see the numerous Moreporks calling from the forests but once again failed with the owls although our own glow-worms and views of the Southern Cross compensated.

Day 12

Saturday 18th November

Untroubled by our shunning of his evening walk, Sude was on duty after breakfast to show us the daily spectacle of feeding New Zealand Freshwater Eels at a point in the river a few hundred metres from the lodge. Within minutes of beginning to toss food scraps into the water a writhing mass of eels was gathered under the bank and such was the frenzy that some hurled themselves some distance out of the water. The largest specimens were over a metre long and all displayed wonderful blue eyes, an unexpected iris colouration for a fish! It was a surprisingly impressive sight and as we stood photographing the eels, a male Paradise Shelduck literally risked life and limb by sailing into the mass for a share of the bread.

Continuing south along the coast we stopped for a short while at Ship Creek, a fine sweep of beach covered with a variety of bleached and twisted tree parts, each one capable of retailing at several hundred pounds in a British Garden Centre. Having recently paid a ridiculous amount of money for a small lump of New Zealand wood at my local garden centre I did a quick calculation and estimated that some £20,000 of material was lying there if only I could fit it into my bag..... Highlight here was a pod of 6-7 Hector's Dolphins working methodically up and down the breaking surf just off the beach. One of the smallest and rarest of the world's cetacea, Hector's Dolphins occur along a restricted stretch of South Island coast and we were very fortunate that our visit coincided with their appearance at Ship Creek. An attractive mix of light grey and black these beautiful dolphins love to 'surf' incoming waves and are rarely found more than a few miles offshore. The population is estimated to be no more than 2,000 animals and with mortality from fishing nets increasing annually the future prospects of this endemic mammal are not promising.

Soon after leaving the beach the road turned inland and we began the long haul through the Haast Pass. Once again the impressive montane scenery brought cameras into action but birdlife was relatively sparse apart from the usual European passerines and the ubiquitous Australian Magpie. At the highest point of the pass we stopped to walk along a forest trail where some of the last remaining Yellowheads may be found. After a little searching we found at least two of these pretty little birds but whilst the male continued to sing from high in the canopy it was frustratingly difficult to obtain views and certainly a strain on the neck muscles. Birdlife in this tract of forest was still quite prolific and during our short walk we also managed to find Tomtit, Rifleman, Bellbirds and a roving flock of Brown Creepers.

Our lunch break at a nice roadside diner near Makarora which boasted a couple of light aircraft across the road evidently available if required for scenic flights. This is something we saw quite frequently in our travels around the South Island, small airstrips, often no more than a field, servicing the obvious demand for aerial views of the mountains.

The remainder of the drive through the Lindis Pass into the vast McKenzie Basin was largely uneventful but the ever changing landscape gradually transformed from the forest clad mountains to more gently rounded green hills and then the wide open spaces of the Basin. Brightly coloured lupins became a conspicuous feature of the roadside, scenes much beloved by tourists but as Mark informed us, a serious threat to the natural formation of the braided rivers which so many native birds depend upon. Roadside birds occurring in numbers in the huge valley included South Island Pied Oystercatchers, Spur-winged Plovers, Paradise Shelduck, Purple Swamphens and Skylarks whilst the harrier count steadily increased and a small flock of Black-fronted Terns was a new addition to the holiday list.

An afternoon coffee stop at a Wool Centre at the point where the hills entered the flat country of the McKenzie Basin proved to be the sales outlet for the farm where the famous ram Shrek was discovered. Shrek had become internationally famous when he was found in some remote corner of the estate having evaded shearing for a number of years. The quantity of wool that was eventually removed constituted a world record and catapulted Shrek into stardom. I was amazed to learn that he is still a celebrity in New Zealand and tours the country raising money for charity!

Arriving near Twizel in late afternoon we turned off the main road to follow a canal leading past a series of ponds, fringed with trees and bushes, where a Black Stilt had been seen recently. Despite a very careful search from the raised embankment we failed to find the endemic wader although a number of Pied Stilts raised our hopes. Other birds observed during the afternoon included Great Crested Grebes, New Zealand Scaup and two Grey Duck on a lake near Twizel, Banded Dotterel, and about 50 Black-billed Gulls, the first since Miranda earlier in the trip.

We completed the remainder of our journey to Lake Ohau arriving at the very splendid and magnificently isolated Lodge by late afternoon. Away to the north the snowy peaks of the Alps dominated the horizon, whilst separated from the lodge by just a belt of trees, the blue waters of Lake Ohau provided a magnificent setting for our overnight accommodation. Another splash of colour to the local landscape was provided by the rare New Zealand Mistletoe which had turned the canopy of their host trees beside the lake, a patchwork of bright crimson in an explosion of summer flowers. We were glad that this was another two night stay and the launderette was soon busy as tour members caught up on washing! For such a remote hotel it was surprisingly busy and there was plenty of chatter during the evening meal, not all of it generated by the Naturetrek party!

Day 13

Sunday 19th November

A perfect summer's day began in fine style as we diverted off the main road to follow the course of a feeder canal through several hydro-electric stations, down to the head of Lake Benmore. This is a popular recreational area but it is of ornithological note as the home of the Black Stilt breeding programme and one of the best places in the country to find this elegant wader. Scores of New Zealand Scaup were swimming in the canals and

reaching a vantage point over the valley we identified a pair Grey Duck on the water along with several New Zealand Shoveler. It was evident from their behaviour that several Banded Dotterel were nesting on the gravel shore and at least a dozen Pied Stilts were wading at the lake edge. Initial scanning failed to reveal any of their rarer brethren but as hopes began to plunge a flurry of activity on a distant patch of marsh attracted our attention and through the telescopes we were delighted to see a lone adult Black Stilt vigorously driving off any Pied Stilt that came within range. They were distant views spoilt by an increasing heat haze but the all black plumage was clearly visible and Mark confirmed that the pugnacious behaviour is typical of the usual inter-action between the two species. Closer at hand, a number of Black-fronted Terns were hawking over the water and several Caspian Terns could be seen with gulls on a far mud-spit. European Hares scattered over the grassy shoreline were keeping a wary eye on us, another introduced mammal which was apparently doing well in this area. One of the widespread introduced birds, the Common Redpoll, had been more often seen or heard in flight on previous days but today a small party was feeding on seeding plants in the car park and gave fine views.

Elated by the success of our visit we meandered around a series of tree-fringed pools before leaving the area. Mark had often seen Bitterns on these pools but they were not at home today, nor were the resident Marsh (Baillon's) Crakes but on the very last pool visited, one responded to the tape and focused our attention on a small area of swamp. Eventually two birds emerged from cover and treated us to magnificent views as they posed in the open just metres away. It was quite an unexpected encounter and added yet another crane into the competition for most attractive family member of the tour. The widespread Pukeko or Swamphen was a strong contender for the title, but the Banded Rail at Miranda had been impressive as was the Spotless Crake on Tirri Tirri. As we watched these dapper little birds picking their way around the muddy shoreline it was hard to decide and I suppose any such choice is invidious as each bird has its own unique qualities.

From Twizel we headed towards Mount Cook following the shoreline of the huge Lake Pukaki. The water level was extremely low in the lake exposing acres of mud and when we stopped to scan the water's edge we found an impressive congregation of stilts including at least 30 adult and immature Black Stilts. Some of the feeding waders were relatively close and through telescopes we could appreciate much more detail on the all-black stilts than had been possible earlier. Even though the nesting success of the Black Stilts is very carefully engineered and manipulated by the conservation programme, and many of the young birds would have been recently released from the breeding pens at Twizel, it was still an amazing spectacle to observe so many of these severely endangered waders in one spot and it is quite possible that had we time to explore the shoreline the actual total would have been even greater.

The main objective today however was to visit Aoraki/Mount Cook and we could not have wished for better conditions to see the mountains. As we drove the 70 kilometres from Twizel, we half expected the clouds to return but it stayed fine and the alps looked at their best with the snowy higher elevations shining in the sun. The well maintained highway now leads to the very base of the mountains where a sizeable settlement has now grown around the National Park Headquarters and includes a very plush but extremely ugly hotel complex. We joined large numbers of other tourists to look around the information centre and then strolled to lunch in the bustling Hermitage Hotel which seemed more like a Tokyo restaurant with the number of Japanese visitors. The views of the mountains were stunning but I could well imagine a very different vista when the weather conditions were less benign! After the meal we drove a little further towards the massif and walked a short distance along the start of the Hooker Valley trail. It was again very busy with human traffic but most of us completed the walk to the head of the valley which afforded superb views of Mount Cook with a backdrop of clear blue sky. Mount

Cook Lilies grew in profusion here but birdlife was sparse although somewhat incongruously, a pair of Canada Geese honked at us from a small lake beside the track. There was also something odd about hearing numerous Chaffinches singing in this alpine setting.

After a superb morning in the mountains we made our way back to Lake Ohau to allow photography of the mistletoe flowers, then Mark took the coach up the steep zig-zag track leading to the local ski-field. The reason for this excursion was to hopefully see New Zealand Pipit but we had to climb some distance before a pair eventually appeared beside the track. The view from this vantage point was breathtaking but the narrow gravelly track was more suited to a smaller 4x4 and a driver with lesser skills might have found it a little daunting! Needless to say Mark had no such problems and after looking at the pipits he calmly made a three point turn and took us back to the lodge.

Running through the bird log in the evening, it was striking that even in this wild and remote countryside, Blackbirds and Song Thrushes continued to be two of the commonest species whilst it was less surprising to note an abundance of Skylarks. Other ubiquitous species included the patrolling harriers, Red-billed and Southern Black-backed(Dominican) Gulls, Spur-winged Plover and in suitable habitat, the charming little Silvereve.

Day 14

Monday 20th November

After yesterday's benevolence, the weather showed another side today as strong winds and heavy rain was forecast for the mountains. Our destination was Invercargill to catch a light aircraft across to Stewart Island but as we set out from Lake Ohau, it was clear that the conditions might thwart our plans. Despite the forecast the long drive south via Alexandra and Gore was accomplished in relatively bright and sunny conditions but it did become progressively cloudy and windy as we neared the coast and steady rain began as we met the incoming weather front. It was mostly a morning spent travelling but we did have a coffee stop in Alexandra where sadly Elizabeth was leaving us to return to Dunedin where we would meet her again at the end of the tour.

We eventually arrived in Invercargill for a late lunch at the cafeteria in the city museum in which proved to be an excellent place to spend our time. An exhibition about New Zealand's Sub-Antarctic islands seemed somehow appropriate to the weather but the star attraction had to be the Tuatara display. The museum is the centre of a Tuatara breeding programme with the aim of re-introducing these strange reptiles to various offshore islands in the hope of building up numbers. Tuataras are living relic with a lineage that dates back 200 million years, and although superficially like lizards are unique in the world of reptiles as the sole survivors of this ancient order. Among their many peculiarities is the presence of a so-called third eye in the middle of the head which is visible on young animals but is soon obscured by a bony plate. In a depressingly familiar manner these remarkable reptiles have been exterminated on the mainland but seem to do well when predators are removed and may have a more optimistic future. A number of smaller specimens were on display but the 'big daddy' was named Henry and occupied his own vivarium having acquired a reputation for attacking the younger male pretenders to his title. A notice proclaimed that he was believed to have been hatched in 1880 but apart from his size he showed no signs of age and stared haughtily at us with clear dark eyes, (an unusual feature in a reptile). I found it very moving to be just a metre away from this living Dinosaur and almost impossible to contemplate his great age but Henry was less impressed by me and just stared back as he must have done to many thousand of visitors over the years!

The rain had almost stopped as we made our way to Invercargill airport and checked-in for the two Islander flights to Stewart Island. There was a certain nervousness in the atmosphere as a result of the earlier inclement weather but fortunately Islander aircraft are made of sturdy material and the twenty minute crossing proved to be no problem at all. We were split between two aircraft but re-united at the seafront South Sea Hotel, our home for two days. First impressions of Stewart Island from the air revealed a rugged, hilly island covered in Podocarp forest with little sign of human activity away from the settlement of Oban, which boasts some 360 residents. After the uncertainty about reaching the island it was satisfying to relax on the balcony of the old fashioned hotel, watched hopefully by Red-billed Gulls perched on the railings, and look out over the now tranquil waters of Halfmoon Bay. Various boats were moored in the harbour but the storm had abated and prospects for the following day looked good. We learned that the 'kiwi outing' had been fixed for later in the evening and before dinner most of the group went to explore Oban, highlight being a crowd of confiding Kakas noisily jostling for scraps in the garden of a building near the hotel. These impressive parrots are numerous around the settlement and often seen in flight but this was our first opportunity to admire them at close range (at times almost too close!)

After an excellent evening meal in the hotel we wandered down to the jetty at 9pm and boarded the 'Wildfire' skippered by local naturalist Philip Smith for a nocturnal foray in search of Kiwis. Stewart Island is famous for the relative abundance of its Brown Kiwi population, and is regarded as perhaps the best place in New Zealand for observing these peculiar birds. Even here they require a little effort to see them but Philip has earned a reputation as the 'Kiwi man', taking people to see the birds on favourable nights through the season. As we set sail it was still light enough to birdwatch and without traveling far out of Oban we had soon seen Stewart Island Shag, three Fiordland Crested Penguins and plenty of Blue Penguins. At length we tied up at a remote jetty in gathering darkness and under Philip's experienced supervision followed a trail through forest with the sound of Moreporks accompanying our steps. The path was exceedingly slithery in places following the recent rain and after several hundreds metres descended steeply towards the sound of waves breaking on a beach, a rope handrail at the side of the track aiding progress. Emerging onto a wide sweep of beach we obeyed Philip's instruction to switch off our torches and then followed him along the sand as he carefully scanned the high water debris with his red-filtered spotlight. Very soon after arriving his beam suddenly picked out a dumpy shape underneath a curtain of vegetation and there it was, a magnificent Stewart Island Kiwi busily snuffling and probing in the litter just metres away from us! Hardly daring to breathe, we focused binoculars as the light illuminated the feeding bird moving in a curious jerky fashion as it tweaked food items from the line of dried seaweed and other jetsam, even investigating the feet of the tour members. It was a wonderful experience to see this rare bird in such a remote location, the moment enhanced by a twinkling display of southern stars in the sky above. A second bird was also watched by the group before returning to the vessel after a very successful foray.

Back on board the 'Wildfire' we were in a celebratory mood as the boat raced back through the darkness to Oban. It was after midnight by the time we got back to the hotel and scattered to our rooms but everyone was still elated from the evening encounter.

Day 15

Tuesday 21st November

Dawn around Oban was a noisy event as scores of Tui emerged from their communal roost in the heart of the settlement, a dozen or more Kaka roamed from garden to garden and Red-crowned Parakeets added their

contribution to the din. Small flocks of Redpolls, the males resplendent in full breeding plumage, were feeding on the grassy verges and several New Zealand Woodpigeons flapped over the trees. After the ferries had departed for the mainland we made our way down to the jetty and boarded the 'Wildfire' again for a day excursion around Paterson Inlet. Although mostly bright and sunny, the remnants of yesterday's front in the form of sudden squalls, swept through the inlet from time to time but hardly interfered with a very pleasant day cruising around the coastal waters. Not far from the settlement we spotted a Fiordland Crested Penguin standing among boulders on the shore and then three or four more in the entrance to a rocky cave where they were no doubt nesting. Philip manoeuvred the vessel to give us close-up views while the birds stood peering at us in that bemused manner typical of all penguins.

Another seabird present in good numbers was the handsome White-capped (Shy) Albatross, and after going alongside a fishing boat to obtain close up views of some 50 albatrosses on the water we saw many hundred more during the cruise treating us to spectacular displays as they glided over the sea. Single Salvin's and Royal Albatrosses were also identified along with 3-4 Brown Skuas, a single Giant Petrel and ten or more Cape Pigeons. As we pitched our way through rather more turbulent waters as we reached the open sea, Common Diving Petrels hurtled over the waves like Little Auks and scores of Sooty Shearwaters were gliding with the albatrosses on either side of the vessel.

Pied Shags were noted at many places but we also encountered larger numbers of the local speciality, Stewart Island Shag, including a nesting colony with well grown young on an isolated rock stack. Exploring the scatter of islands to the south of the inlet we found plenty of Fur Seals and Philip's local knowledge really paid off when he took us to a sheltered bay where eight or more Yellow-eyed Penguins were exploiting an obvious shoal of fish along with scores of gulls and White-fronted Terns. The penguins spent more time underwater than above but by gently nosing the boat forwards we obtained superb views and could even trace their underwater progress as they rocketed past the vessel. These big penguins are not always easy to find and it was pleasing to note that most of the group were young of the year indicating a reasonable level of breeding success.

Ulva Island was our (belated) lunch stop and as we stepped ashore, a family of Weka greeted us from the beach, no doubt interested in sharing our sandwiches. Like Tiri Tiri Matangi, Ulva Island is the centre of a re-introduction programme and possesses large tracts of superb forest to provide habitat for the native bird species. Lack of time precluded a detailed tour but we followed a circular trail through the trees and met with a number of birds including absurdly tame New Zealand Robins, a mobile, but confiding, flock of Brown Creepers, Bellbirds, Fantails, Grey Warblers and Red-crowned Parakeets. Another highlight here was an obliging Kaka perched on a branch uttering his extraordinary 'song' which sounds a bit like a plug being removed from a sink full of water and the contents draining away.

As we followed the trails we also came upon several family parties of Wekas which made fascinating watching as the tiny fluff-ball chicks were fussed over by anxious parents making reassuring clucking noises like broody hens. Wekas are the tamest of birds but I thought wrongly that the presence of youngsters might have induced a little more wariness!

All too quickly our time on Ulva came to an end and we returned to the 'Wildfire' for the short journey back to Oban. It had been an interesting and varied day with some great seabird moments although at times the rougher waters of the open sea had made conditions a little uncomfortable for some of the group. All was forgotten back

on land and we enjoyed a splendid meal at a restaurant on a hill above the harbour where several of the group ordered the house speciality of steaks served on hot stones.

Day 16

Wednesday 22nd November

A beautiful clear morning with hardly a breath of wind made it even more difficult to leave this delightful island but it did ensure that our flight back to Invercargill had none of the drama of our outward journey. Banded Dotterels on the airfield were our last Stewart Island birds but before breakfast the usual Oban mix of Kakas, Redpolls and Tuis made themselves known. Back on the mainland we were delighted to meet Alice again who had safely delivered her coach to Auckland then caught a flight back south to join the last days of our tour. From the airport our route took us through the middle of Invercargill and we were impressed by the wide airy streets and old colonial buildings with many of the names betraying the areas strong historical links with Scotland. Invercargill was in my opinion one of the nicest cities we visited and with Stewart Island just twenty minutes away plus Henry and Nature Quest Leader Wynston Cooper as distinguished residents it had a lot going for it!

Fiordland National Park was next on our agenda and the first section of the drive west took us along the shoreline of Foveaux Strait between South and Stewart Islands with the snowy mountains of Fiordland looming in the distance ahead of us. Just before midday we finally reached Te Anau, a town with the look of a tourist mecca which however seemed pleasantly devoid of crowds on this warm, soporific morning. After an enjoyable lunch, and the chance for some more retail therapy (which included mass purchasing of wind-up kiwis), we returned to the coach and completed the last leg of the drive to our overnight accommodation at Te Anau Downs. The blend of mountains and lakes gave the countryside the feel of Canada or Northern Europe and it would have been no surprise to hear the wailing of Great Northern Divers coming from the lake!

Pausing only long enough to freshen up we boarded the coach again for an afternoon visit to the heart of Fiordland with the goal of trying to find Rock Wrens near the Homer Tunnel. Time was limited, and as we were returning to this area the following day we made few stops despite the breathtaking scenery revealed by every twist in the road. Half a dozen or more Keas were mooching about the roadside as we arrived at the Homer Tunnel and several were enthusiastically working on removing various parts of vehicles in the car park. Kea beaks are like avian tin-openers and they soon make short work of any projecting aerials or windscreen wipers! We followed a track leading into the boulder scree beside the tunnel entrance and with surprising ease were rewarded by seeing a Rock Wren bobbing at us from on top of a nearby rock. We were probably as surprised as the bird which promptly vanished into a crevice only to re-appear fifty metres away at Mark's feet. For what seemed like minutes, but was probably seconds, this peculiar bird scuttled about the rock surfaces in front of Mark, and even ventured into a small bush from which it emerged with a green caterpillar in its bill. The photographers managed to dash off a few shots before it retreated into its rock city and apart from one brief view for some of the group, this was the extent of our encounter with one of the most highly adapted little birds in New Zealand. Rock Wrens are typically birds of the high alpine rock fields and somehow manage to survive in these inhospitable terrains throughout the year, sometimes living for long periods beneath a surface covering of snow! As we waited for a reappearance in the afternoon sun, Keas could be heard calling from the nearby peaks and from time to time small avalanches of snow fell from the higher elevations making ominous crashing noises but petering out long before reaching the canyon.

At length we gave up on the wrens and drove back to the motel at Te Anau Downs. After the evening meal we attempted another Morepork search but nothing much was heard and the expedition soon returned.

Day 17

Thursday 23rd November

Rather unusually I overslept and had just thirty minutes to wash, pack and grab breakfast which did not get the day off to a very good start for me!

After leaving the motel we began a leisurely drive towards Milford Sound, pausing along the way to look for birds, or admire the scenery as coach after coach thundered by carrying tourists to catch the boat excursions out into Milford Sound. Fiordland is New Zealand's largest National Park but relatively few parts of it are easily accessible and in this respect the main road to Milford is a very busy route at this time bringing visitors to admire the glacially gouged valleys, lakes and mountains which comprise the Park. Magnificent forests of Red, Silver and Mountain Beech are a feature of the Fiordland vegetation, the composition varying with altitude and location. This is one of the wettest places in New Zealand where some degree of rainfall is almost expected each day so once again we were fortunate to enjoy sunny warm conditions for our visit, although by now we knew that our tame meteorologist arranged such things for us in advance!

Various stops enabled us to take photographs of the scenery and also provided a few birding opportunities with species seen during the journey including Australasian Harrier and Black-fronted Terns. Exploring the forests we found little birdlife and certainly no evidence of native species such as Yellowhead, once quite numerous in this habitat, but we did see a pair of Rifleman bringing food to a nest beside the path and several Tomtits in addition to the inevitable Tui and Silvereyes which seem to prosper everywhere. A Kaka also flew over calling. The loss of the bird species from mainland New Zealand was one of the great ecological disasters of the 20th Century but one can only cling to the hope that re-introduction projects such as the ones we had witnessed on Tiri Tiri Matangi will one day bear fruit on a national scale. Before that can happen the causes of the decline will have to be addressed and sadly that will involve the elimination of introduced predators. It is not the fault of the poor old Possums and Stoats, which are only doing their best to survive in new surroundings, but the blame certainly belongs to the people who introduced a whole variety of alien creatures to New Zealand and it was depressing to learn from Mark that such ill-advised introductions are still taking place.

As we arrived near the Homer Tunnel in late morning some of the group walked off to explore the Gertrude Valley where we were later to have our picnic lunch whilst a few of us returned to the Rock Wren site for another look. Within a short while of reaching the spot we once again had a male bobbing about at our feet but just as on the previous afternoon, it soon vanished among the boulders and did not reappear. Yellowhammers and Dunnocks were much more obliging and caused several false alarms!

We ate a picnic lunch in a sheltered corner of the Gertrude Valley then continued to Milford Sound where a vast assembly of coaches awaited the return of their occupants from early afternoon boat rides. Mark had timed our arrival to coincide with this mass exodus and the strategy worked as we dodged the worst crowds and boarded one of the pleasure craft for a trip down the Sound. The cruise took us beneath towering vertical cliffs and tumbling waterfalls as we navigated along the fiord but from the natural history aspect it was fairly uneventful although we did pause to look at a number of recumbent Fur Seals and Steve spotted some Fiordland Crested Penguins near the mouth of the inlet.

Thus ended another very scenic day full of interest but in view of the region's reputation I was relieved that the weather had been kind to us. As the motel was full for the night we returned to Te Anau and stayed at a hotel in the heart of the town. It was a pleasant enough place and the restaurant was good but it was a lot busier than the small motels we had been using elsewhere and I certainly preferred the latter.

Day 18

Friday 24th November

Leaving the town at 9, we travelled from Te Anau to Dunedin via the amusing combination of Gore and Clinton. Driving east from Te Anau we passed many coaches full of tourists heading at speed to Milford Sound for the morning sailings and considered ourselves lucky to not be among them. In our direction the highway was fairly empty and we made steady progress passing deer farms, the headquarters of the Takahe rearing unit, and an expanse of Red Tussock, another very much diminished local plant species.

As we neared Dunedin, wetland areas beside the road revealed many Black Swans and some New Zealand Scaup then we turned off the main highway to follow a network of minor roads to the coast south of Dunedin passing through Brighton which looked nothing like its Sussex namesake. We stopped at the side of a small estuary for our last picnic lunch where we were joined by Elizabeth who had driven to meet us from the nearby family home and brought their lively little dog along to share the fun. Royal Spoonbills are often to be found on this estuary but were not obliging today although Gill did spot some in the distance.

Continuing into Dunedin through the southern suburbs we were soon unloading at our overnight motel not far from the city centre but there was little time to unpack as we had an afternoon appointment for a boat trip around Taiaroa Head, the site of the only mainland colony of Royal Albatrosses. Back on the bus, we negotiated the city traffic and then followed a winding road along the centre of the Otago Peninsula before running alongside the estuary where White-faced Herons, gulls and oystercatchers were feeding on the exposed mudflats beside the road. With only minutes in hand we finally reached the jetty at Weller's Rock just as passengers from an earlier tour were disembarking, and quickly took the places vacated on the m.v. Monarch. Sailing below the headland we were soon watching the famous albatrosses gliding in suitably majestic fashion over the cliffs and several pairs were clearly visible on the ground presumably incubating eggs. Several times we witnessed an entertaining greeting ceremony as an incoming bird was greeted by its mate and observed the awkward shuffling gait of these supreme flyers on terra firma. According to the commentary on the 'Monarch' some 50 Royal Albatrosses are now present at this slowly increasing colony but at this stage of the protracted nesting season not all are ashore and we probably saw about 12 individuals in total including three immatures on the sea which the skipper took us right up to.

Other birds were also nesting on Taiaora and the captain took our vessel as close as possible to observe the seabird colonies which included many pairs of Stewart Island, Pied and Spotted Shags plus rather surprisingly, several pairs of Royal Spoonbill. Enduring the choppy water a little way out to sea we saw Sooty Shearwaters gliding over the waves then retreated to the more sheltered waters of the bay again to sail among fishing flocks of White-fronted Terns and locate a few Blue Penguins standing on the shore. Fur Seals sprawled on the rocks completed an exciting hour and we then returned to Weller's Rock where most of the passengers disembarked from the vessel, leaving us to enjoy an early evening cruise back to Dunedin following a deep water channel past mudbanks and islets where Bar-tailed Godwits were feeding alongside flocks of gulls, oystercatchers and

cormorants. As we sailed, plate after plate of delicious savouries arrived from the galley to provide an unusual but much appreciated buffet to conclude our New Zealand odyssey. One of the Monarch team had driven the coach back to Dunedin and it was waiting to meet us as we tied up at a jetty on the waterfront and stepped ashore. The cruise, and the excellent meal, had been a great way to end the trip and once again the weather had stayed fine for our tenth boat trip of the holiday.

Day 19

Saturday 25th November

Most spent the morning in Dunedin exploring the shops and unloading dollars, then we travelled to the Hangar 'estate' where Elizabeth had prepared a superb lunch for us. As we relaxed in the garden overlooking a tranquil scene of forested hillsides and gorse covered slopes it was easy to forget the long journey ahead but eventually we could postpone reality no longer and it was time to head for the airport. Since our departure from Auckland we had covered some 2,700 road miles, undertaken ten boat trips and two flights. It had been a thoroughly enjoyable experience and I would like to take this opportunity to thank my travelling companions for being one of the nicest groups I have ever had the good fortune of escorting. My own role on this tour was very much as a bag carrier but I was struck by the instant rapport between tour members and the good humour which characterised our group throughout the tour and elicited compliments at each place we visited.

The flight from Dunedin to Auckland via a stop at Wellington took us back over many of the places we had visited but from 30,000 feet much of the ground was obscured by cloud. There followed the usual sitting around waiting for the international flight to depart and then the long haul back to Heathrow via another session of bureaucratic nonsense at Los Angeles. Some twenty hours later we touched down at Heathrow, slightly earlier than scheduled, and dispersed to our respective corners of the country, taking with us memories of a very special holiday in a wonderful country. All the best to you Henry.....

Bird List

Figures in brackets give the number of days recorded

STEWART ISLAND BROWN KIWI *Apteryx australis*

Two Stewart Island

LITTLE SPOTTED KIWI *A. owenii*

Two sightings Tiri Tiri Matangi

AUSTRALASIAN CRESTED GREBE *Podiceps cristatus* (3)

Pearson's Lake & near Twizel

NEW ZEALAND DABCHICK *Poliiocephalus rufpectus*

3+ Rotorua, Lake

ROYAL ALBATROSS *Diomedea epomophora*

(3) 2-4 Kaikoura, 1 Stewart Island 12+ Taiaroa Head Otago Peninsula

WANDERING ALBATROSS *D. exulans*

30+ Kaikoura pelagic and during whale watching trip

SHY ALBATROSS *D. cauta* (5)

80+ mostly Salvin's (*salvini*) with 1-2 White-capped (*steadi*) off Kaikoura, then 100+ *steadi* around Paterson Inlet Stewart Island. Other sightings of 2-3 birds off South Island coast beginning with crossing from North Island

BLACK-BROWED ALBATROSS *D. melanophrys*

1-2 Adults Kaikoura

NORTHERN GIANT PETREL *Macronectes halli*

10+ off Kaikoura; individuals from Ferry between North & South Islands and off Stewart Island presumed to be Northern

SOUTHERN GIANT PETREL *M. giganteus*

several with Northern off Kaikoura

BULLER'S SHEARWATER *Puffinus bulleri*

One off Kaikoura

SOOTY SHEARWATER *P. griseus* (6)

5+ on crossing from North Island, 1-2 Marlborough Sound & Kaikoura, 20+ off Taiaroa Head

SHORT-TAILED SHEARWATER *P. tenuirostris*

5+ off Kaikoura

FLESH-FOOTED SHEARWATER *P. carneipes*

20+ crossing from North to South Island, several Marlborough Sound

FLUTTERING SHEARWATER *P. gavia*

Abundant Marlborough Sound

HUTTON'S SHEARWATER *P. huttoni*

Abundant off Kaikoura

COMMON DIVING PETREL *Pelecanoides urinatrix* (4)

20+ Marlborough Sound, several Stewart Island Paterson Inlet also a few between North & South Island and off Tiri Tiri Matangi

WHITE-CHINNED PETREL *Procellaria aequinoctialis*

3+ off Kaikoura

WESTLAND PETREL *P. westlandica*

50+ off Kaikoura

CAPE PIGEON *Daption capense*

1 Marlborough Sound, 50+ off Kaikoura, 10+ Paterson Inlet

FAIRY PRION *Pachyptila turtur*

Seen off Tiri Tiri Matangi then 30+ between North & South Islands

YELLOW-EYED PENGUIN *Megadyptes antipodes*

Party of c8 Paterson Inlet

BLUE PENGUIN *Eudyptula minor* (8)

Seen off Tiri Tiri Matangi, 6-10 Marlborough Sound, 20+ Paterson Inlet Stewart Island, 5+ off Taiaroa Head

FIORDLAND CRESTED PENGUIN *Eudyptes pachyrynchus*

4 Monro Beach, 4+ Paterson Inlet Stewart Island, 5 Milford Sound

AUSTRALASIAN GANNET *Morus serrator* (5)

Colony at Muriwai, another 100+ noted on subsequent days at Miranda, off Tiri Tiri Matangi, on crossing from North Island and in Marlborough Sounds

BLACK SHAG(CORMORANT) *Phalacrocorax carbo* (5) Scatter of sightings on both islands, mostly 1-4 birds**PIED SHAG *P. varius* (10)**

Widespread around coasts of both islands, generally small numbers

LITTLE BLACK SHAG *P. sulcirostris*

10+ Rotorua

LITTLE SHAG *P. melanoleucos* (2)

Tree colony at Rotorua and some near Kaikoura

STEWART ISLAND SHAG *Leucocarbo chalconotus*

Fairly numerous Paterson inlet Stewart Island and more Taiaroa Head- colonies at both locations

KING SHAG *L. carunculatus*

30+ Marlborough Sound

SPOTTED SHAG *Stictocarbo punctatus* (5)

Numerous Marlborough Sound, around Kaikoura coast & Taiaroa Head

AUSTRALASIAN BITTERN *Botaurus poiciloptilus*

Briefly in flight Lake Taupo

GREAT EGRET(WHITE HERON) *Egretta alba*

One by roadside Highway 6 to Haast

WHITE-FACED HERON *Ardea novaehollandiae* (13)

Seen virtually daily-generally small numbers but maximum day counts of 20+

ROYAL SPOONBILL *Platalea regia* (3)

3-4 Foxton Estuary, distantly at Brighton and several pairs Taiaroa Head

BLACK SWAN *Cygnus atratus* (13)

Widespread and locally common on lakes, estuaries etc. Many cygnets noted. Maximum day counts 50-100 birds

MUTE SWAN *c. olor*

Two North Island

CANADA GOOSE *Branta canadensis* (5)

pairs or small flocks scattered around South Island wetland sites

CAPE BARREN GOOSE *Cereopsis novaehollandiae*

One pair with two goslings near Cheviot South Island

PARADISE SHELDUCK *Todorna variegata* (17)

Common both islands, the most abundant duck species both inland and coastal- many ducklings noted

BLUE DUCK *Hymenolaimus malocorhynchus*

One pair and two ducklings at North Island site

MALLARD *Anas platyrhynchos* (17)

Seen almost daily but no doubt many were not truly wild birds

GREY DUCK *A. superciliosa* (5)

4+ near Twizel

AUSTRALASIAN(NEW ZEALAND)SHOVELER *A. rhyngotis* (3)

Scatter of sightings, mostly pairs or small numbers

GREY TEAL *A. gracilis*

Encountered once only on North Island 30+ birds – some with ducklings

BROWN TEAL *A. aucklandica*

Two introduced birds Tiri Tiri Matangi

NEW ZEALAND SCAUP *Aythya novaeseelandiae* (9)

The common diving duck on lakes, reservoirs etc of both islands, maximum count 50+ near Twizel

AUSTRALASIAN HARRIER *Circus approximans* (16)

A common roadside bird on both islands- several day counts of 10-15 birds

NEW ZEALAND FALCON *Falco novaeseelandia*

Two Pureora, one Waioteka

PHEASANT *Phasianus colchicus* (3)

Two roadside birds North Island

WILD TURKEY *Meleagris gallopavo* (6)

Roadside birds North Island and South Island

CALIFORNIA QUAIL *Lophortyx californica* (4)

Roadside pairs on North Island

BROWN QUAIL *Synoicus ypsilophorus*

Numerous Tiri Tiri Matangi

WEKA *Gallirallus australis* (4)

Roadside Westland area of South Island - 8+ Paterson Inlet Stewart Island (beaches & Ulva Island)-several pairs with chicks

BANDED RAIL *Rallus philippensis*

Pair with two chicks Miranda

SPOTLESS CRAKE *Porzana tabuensis*

One TiriTiri Matangi

MARSH (BAILLON'S) CRAKE *P. pusilla*

Two near Twizel

TAKAHE *Porphyrio mantelli*

Several captive reared introduced birds Tiri Tiri Matangi

PUKEKO (PURPLE SWAMPHEN) *P. porphyrio* (14)

Widespread in suitable roadside habitats (particularly North Island)

COOT *Fulica atra*

5+ St Anne's Wildfowl Refuge

PIED OYSTERCATCHER *Haematopus ostralegus* (8)

Many Miranda then daily on South Island in varying numbers both coastal and inland

VARIABLE OYSTERCATCHER *H. unicolor* (9)

Frequent but in generally small numbers on coasts of both islands

SPUR-WINGED PLOVER (MASKED LAPWING) *Vanellus miles* (14)

Numerous in roadside fields & open areas both islands

PIED STILT *Himantopus himantopus* (7)

Present in small numbers on wetlands on both islands- several day counts of 30+

BLACK STILT *H. novaezelandiae*

30+ MacKenzie Basin

BANDED DOTTEREL *Charadrius bicinctus* (7)

Total of 30+ birds at a variety of sites, mostly South Island

NEW ZEALAND DOTTEREL *C. obscurus*

Two Miranda

BLACK-FRONTED DOTTEREL *C. melanops*

One adult on river en route to Foxton North Island

PACIFIC GOLDEN PLOVER *Pluvialis fulva*

c10 Miranda

KNOT *Calidris canutus*

A number at Miranda, five Foxton Estuary

SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER *C. acuminata*

Three Miranda

WRYBILL *Anarhynchus frontalis*

Four Miranda area, one Foxton Estuary

TURNSTONE *Arenaria interpres*

10+ Miranda also on two days South Island

TEREK SANDPIPER *Tringa terek*

One Miranda

BAR-TAILED GODWIT *Limosa lapponica*

Thousands Miranda also Foxton Estuary and on mudflats off Dunedin/Otago

BROWN SKUA *Catharacta skua*

Three Paterson Inlet Stewart Island

ARCTIC SKUA *Stercorarius parasiticus*

Three Marlborough Sound **DOMINICAN GULL** *Larus dominicanus* (19) Common/locally abundant both islands

RED-BILLED GULL *L. novaehollandiae* (18)

Common/locally abundant both islands

BLACK-BILLED GULL *L. bulleri* (4)

50+ Miranda; generally more widespread South Island mostly Mackenzie Basin and around Te Anau.

CASPIAN TERN *Sterna caspia* (5)

c10 Miranda, one Foxton, 5+ near Twizel

WHITE-FRONTED TERN *S. striata* (14)

Common coastal tern often present in good numbers at favoured locations and several colonies noted

BLACK-FRONTED TERN *S. albostrata* (5)

An inland tern seen in riverine locations on South Island in generally small numbers (10+ Max)

NEW ZEALAND PIGEON *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae* (11)

Handsome endemic seen in small numbers at various mostly forested locations on both islands

ROCK(FERAL)PIGEON *Columba livia*

Widespread in urban & rural locations

KEA *Nestor notabilis* (3)

3+ Arthur's Pass & c10 birds Fiordland

KAKA *N. meridionalis* (5)

5+ North Island and 15-20 Stewart & Ulva Islands, 1-2 Eglinton Valley

SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOO *Cacatua galerita*

Several Cascade Kauri Park

EASTERN ROSELLA *Platyercus eximius* (3)

Several Cascade Kauri Park, and 3 Pureora

RED-CROWNED PARAKEET *Cyanoramphus novaezealandiae* (4)

Tiri Tiri Matangi & Stewart Island

YELLOW-CROWNED PARAKEET *C. auriceps* (2)

Pureora North Island & heard near Haast Pass South Island

SHINING CUCKOO *Chrysococcyx lucidus*

3+ near Pureora Forest and one near Kaikoura

LONG-TAILED CUCKOO *Eudynamys taitensis*

Several Pureora Forest

(MOREPORK *Ninox novaeseelandiae*

Heard 4+ locations both islands, most at Lake Moeraki)

SACRED KINGFISHER *Halcyon sancta* (8)

Most North Island where up to 10+ seen daily but only 2-3 birds South Island

WELCOME SWALLOW *Hirundo tahitica* (17)

Widely distributed and often common

RIFLEMAN *Acanthisitta chloris* (4)

Pair Whakapapa, 3-4 near Haast Pass, 1-2 Mount Cook and pair Eglinton Valley

ROCK WREN *Xenicus gilviventris*

Superb male Homer Tunnel area

SILVEREYE *Zosterops lateralis* (12)

Widespread and numerous both islands

GREY WARBLER *Gerygone igata* (13)

Frequently seen (or heard) both islands in suitable habitats

BLACKBIRD *Turdus merula* (19)

Common/Abundant both islands

SONG THRUSH *T. philomelos* (19)

Common/Abundant both islands

DUNNOCK *Prunella modularis* (12)

Seen (or heard) at many localities but commoner South Island; usually singles and nowhere common

SKYLARK *Alauda arvensis* (15)

Often abundant in open areas

NEW ZEALAND PIPIT *Anthus novaeseelandiae*

Probably overlooked but only seen on mountainside above Lake Ohau

FERNBIRD *Bowdleria punctata*

Several near Lake Taupo N.I., one Westland N.P.

BROWN CREEPER *Mohoua novaeseelandiae*

20+ Ulva Island, several Haast Pass

WHITEHEAD *M. albicilla*

Common Tiri Tiri Matangi, others seen at Pureora Forest

YELLOWHEAD *M. ochrocephala*

Two near Haast Pass

FANTAIL *Rhipidura fuliginosa* (8)

Widespread both islands in forest & scrub habitats

TOMTIT *Petroica macrocephala* (7)

3-4 North Island and 6-7 'yellow-breasted' on South Island

NEW ZEALAND ROBIN *P. australis* (7)

Tiri Tiri Matangi & Pureora North Island and Ulva Island, Eginton Valley & on island in Marlborough Sound in South

KOKAKO *Callaeas cinerea*

2-3 Tiri Tiri Matangi and one in native forest on North Island

TUI *Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae* (16)

Locally common in forested areas both islands but also in gardens and more open locations with scattered trees

STITCHBIRD *Notiomystis cinerea*

Tiri Tiri Matangi

BELLBIRD *Anthornis melanura* (14)

Seen, or more often, heard at forest locations on both islands- locally common e.g Tiri Tiri Matangi

SADDLEBACK *Philesturnus carunculatus*

Quite a few Tiri Tiri Matangi also seen on island in Marlborough Sound, heard Ulva Island

HOUSE SPARROW *Passer domesticus* (19)

Common throughout

CHAFFINCH *Fringilla coelebs* (17)

Widespread both islands

REDPOLL *Carduelis flammea* (15)

Small numbers or singles heard or seen both islands but commoner South Island particularly Stewart Island

GOLDFINCH *C. carduelis* (18)

Widespread both islands

GREENFINCH *C. chloris* (14)

Widespread both islands

YELLOWHAMMER *Emberiza citrinella* (14)

Widespread both islands in open country or farmland

STARLING *Sturnus vulgaris* (19)

Common both islands

INDIAN MYNA *Acridotheres tristis* (5)

Common North Island

AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE *Gymnorhina tibicen* (16)

Widespread and locally common both islands

Mammal List

NEW ZEALAND FUR SEAL *Arcocephalus forsteri* (6)

100's South Island coasts

SPERM WHALE *Physeter macrocephalus*

Three (male) off Kaikoura

DUSKY DOLPHIN *Lagenorhynchus obscurus*

Marlborough Sound and off Kaikoura

HECTOR'S DOLPHIN *Cephalorhynchus hectori*

Ship Creek

BRUSH-TAILED POSSUM

Many road kills but only glimpsed at night

BROWN HARE *Lepus capensis* (3)

Particularly Lake Benmore

RABBIT *Oryctolagus cuniculus* (6)

HEDGEHOG One dead in road Te Anau